

Advent Lutheran Church: Censorship – 1st Letter – October 18, 2011

To: Advent Lutheran Church Council
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Ladies and Gentlemen of our Church Council:

This is the **first letter in a series** addressing **Council's censorship of non-exempt material** and the controversy growing out of it. This project should be easy to find on the Internet. Lutherans around the country might chose to review it to get a jumpstart on dealing with similar censorship dilemmas in their own church.

For centuries, ideas have been suppressed under the guise of protecting three basic social institutions; the family, the church, and the state. This controversy reminds me of a prison song: **“When you gets up in the morning, when that big bell ring.”** Every society has had customs, taboos, or rules by which speech, dress, religious observance, and sexual expression were regulated—censorship—to avoid speech or expression deemed bad or evil. **“You goes a marchin’ to the table, see the same damn thing.”** Any Biblical injunction and an appeal to divinity is a handy tool for banning the dissemination of a broad range of materials, expressions, and ideas. **“Knife and fork are on the table, there’s nothing in my pan.”** Censorship – the control of information and ideas circulated within a society. **“If you say ‘nothing about it, have trouble with the man.’** Woe unto any church member who complains. **“Let the midnight special shine its light on me...”** Confronting censorship must always involve confronting some part of ourselves and our common history that is both painful and deep-seated.

What this controversy is about

This controversy grew out of my attempted to collect “non-exempt material” (material that is not executive session or personnel matters) that should have been available to any church member. I encountered resistance, intentional delay, and eventually blatant censorship. I attempted to organize what I could, and upon attempting to make it available to others I encountered resistance from Council. I first tried internally (without knowledge of the Congregation) to address this. I read the Constitution, and thought about this situation, and it seemed to me that the Constitution was—from Council’s perspective—an annoyance and an inconvenience. After contemplating how this problem tended to promote ignorance, instead of doing the opposite, I decide that as a church member I was not obligated to stay quiet about it. After continually being rebuffed and derided by Council members, I eventually used my Information Technology

skills to lampoon and satirize church leaders who engage in censorship.

I question how any reasonable person could think that censorship (of non-exempt material) has advanced, or ever could advance, Advent's mission or purpose as set out in its Constitution. (C4.01 through C4.05) With each duty of Council to act properly, there must be correlative authority of the Congregation to expect the benefit, and correlative authority of any member of the Congregation to draw attention when the benefit is not produced. This is a fundamental authority of every church member. I believe I have this authority, and I will address it in more detail as this project progresses.

This controversy is about (1) unreasonable and unauthorized censorship, and (2) a church members authority to expect access to non-exempt material, and (3) a church member's authority to expect access to the Congregational Council, and (4) a church member's authority to notify everyone when there are problems with 1, 2, or 3.

This controversy is about Council tacitly setting up different classes of church members, with some having access and others not having access to the same non-exempt material, when such authority has not been granted in the Constitution. This controversy is about Council censoring without any justification or any attempt to show a prospective benefit. It is about Council's failure, after months of censoring, to attempt to show whether the past censorship has in any way advanced Advent's purpose.

Although it is ridiculous to argue the point, this controversy deals with the practicality for Council to release non-exempt material. Aside from de minimus inconvenience and no administrative expense, there is no believable argument that Council's censorship is based on practicality. The most cogent excuse—though not believable—came from one of our past Council presidents in his August 2, 2011 email; **"I cannot find a website in the Bible and I believe God is ok with that."** Council will have to try hard to top this.

Another ridiculous point of contention is whether non-exempt material possesses any characteristics that would make it an impediment to Advent's purpose (C4.01 through C4.05), or whether any church member's possession of non-exempt material would be an impediment to Advents purpose, or whether any church member's displaying non-exempt material would be an impediment.

Keeping the flock on the dark

It is hard to imagine how any group of church leaders could legitimately and honestly argue that prior to safely proceeding in their business at hand, they must first assure themselves that their constituents have been adequately kept in the dark. It defies common sense. An informed congregation is always better than an ignorant one.

It would be disingenuous to believe that any congregation would want its board of directors to destroy church material, hide church material, withhold church material, fail to produce church material, lose material through neglect, or scramble it and make it hard to access or use. It is possible, though highly unlikely, that the Advent Congregation would rewrite its governing document to convey such authority to Council.

Remedy of a lone church member

I believe it is possible for a lone church member to take on a board of directors of any church and make a change that will, in the long run, advance the church's stated purpose as set out in its governing document, provided the lone church member is right and the board is wrong. If I work hard at this, I believe I will make a positive difference.

Honor to play this role

Each of us, in our own daily lives, is a representative of the "Church of Christ." (Constitution's Preamble & C15.01.) I am one of the few at Advent who is educated in the narrow field of Information Technology. I have the audacity and tenacity to pursue this. I consider it an honor to represent the Church of Christ in my capacity—the protagonist—in this controversy.

Going it alone

I do not expect any church member to join me in this endeavor. The most compelling reason is that the position I have taken is extremely unpopular, and subjects me to perhaps the highest degree of criticism in the history of Advent. I would not expect another church member to subject himself and his family to this. However, I do not feel like I am walking alone.

Stated another way, I do not expect to have an accomplice in this matter. The most I can hope for is a silent co-conspirator. For an interesting, true story about co-conspirators and accomplices, see *The Murder of Joseph White*, and most interestingly Daniel Webster's Address to the Jury. It is a chapter in an old book by Alvin Sellers printed in about 1911, "Classics of the Bar, Volume Two." I find it more interesting than the matter at hand.

Sellers, A. V. (1911). *The Murder of Joseph White. Classics of the bar, stories of the world's great jury trials and a compilation of forensic masterpieces, Volume Two* (pp. 152-239). Baxley, Ga.: Classic Pub. Co.

< <http://www.archive.org/details/classicsofbarsto02selliala> />

In light of Council's failure to provide an explanation for its censorship of non-exempt material, I looked for an explanation elsewhere. I believe I found one. An editor for *The Redneck Lutheran Lowdown* had an interview with a church leader of another Lutheran church about a similar censorship problem. It might be instructive in our present controversy. The interview follows:

The Redneck Lutheran Lowdown

Interview with Chummy Editor and Otto Autocrat, councilmember of the Hardcore Lutheran Church.



Chummy Editor



Otto Autocrat

- Chummy: Mr. Autocrat, let's talk about censorship and the controversy surrounding it at Hardcore Lutheran Church. I believe censorship is the control exercised over ideas and information circulated among people. Do you agree?
- Otto: Yep, I shore do. Censorship is the stand out feature of this year's crop of church leaders at Hardcore. I'm proud to be amongst 'em.
- Chummy: History has been replete with powerful people, and some of 'em have used their power to affect censorship. But for this to happen in a church like Hardcore--I'm confused.
- Otto: Hardcore needs censorship for security reasons. Generally, we don't publish a darn thing, other than the monthly newsletter and a few piddly announcements which we scrutinize real tight.
- Chummy: I don't see the harm in making all non-exempt material available to any church member who wants it.
- Otto: It's bad to have a lot of papers floatin' around the church. There is intelligence in them thar papers and we've got to guard that autocratic intelligence for its security aspects.
- Chummy: I fail to see any danger to the church. I see no safety risk. Can you explain this?
- Otto: Us cronies that runs this joint has got to feel secure and confident. We need assurance before we make any decision that nobody will question it. That's how we do things here.
- Chummy: I understand that a few members over the years have tried to collect sensitive, though non-exempt, church material.
- Otto: Uhh hhu. We've got to exercise our powers and influence and clamp down on rambunctious church members who would use the stuff to their advantage, and to our disadvantage.
- Chummy: I simply do not understand the need to censor non-exempt material, either hard-copy or electronic.
- Otto: Even though the material in question is non-exempt, we've got to censor the stuff because it might include sexual themes, offensive racial themes or depictions, offensive social or political views, violence or profanity, dubious religious depictions, or magic or witchcraft. This

list is by no means comprehensive. It is best just to censor everything up front.

Chummy: By the way, do you have a favorite religious song?

Otto: Oh, yes. That would have to be the **Deep Elem Blues**. It motivates our congregation, especially the females, when we pass the collection basket.
< <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsB9FzaBUTo&feature=related> />

Chummy: How can a Hardcore church member challenge yall's censorship policy?

Otto: Ifn a church member wants something, he's got to give us a reason that satisfies us head cronies. That rarely happens.

Chummy: Nowadays, with Information Technology, messages can be shared immediately. For example, the good bishop in Chicago could be notified immediately of a censorship controversy at Hardcore Lutheran Church.

Otto: If any church member does that he will be disciplined under Chapter 15 of our Constitution for persistent trouble-making and conduct grossly unbecoming a member of the Church of Christ. We don't tolerate no trouble-makers in our midst.

Chummy: Oh, my goodness. That sounds real serious. Does the sun rise in the west at Hardcore Lutheran Church?

Otto: Yep, and I'm proud to be amongst 'em.

Chummy: Unfortunately our time is up. Thank you for the interview.
